

Congresswoman Betty McCollum

Opening Statement: Health Care Reform Community Meeting

Macalester College

August 31, 2009

Good evening everyone.

Let me start by thanking Macalester College President Brian Rosenberg for the warm introduction and for hosting this community event. Macalester College is a Minnesota treasure that produces both thinkers and active citizens and I am very pleased to be here tonight.

I would also like to thank Retired Army Specialist Xao Her for leading us in the Pledge of Allegiance and for her service to our country in Iraq.

To all the 4th District residents who are here, as well as those who have joined us from outside the 4th District, thank you for attending tonight's meeting.

Tonight we are going to focus on an issue in which every American, every family, and every business is a stakeholder – the issue is health care.

Over the past weeks we have all seen video of congressional meetings that have turned into unproductive shouting matches. That is not the way tonight's meeting will be conducted. I welcome passionate opinions on this issue and I expect you to share yours with me. I have strong opinions about health care which I will share. I welcome your comments, ideas and concerns on health care reform and goals supported by President Obama whether you support them, oppose them, or are uncertain about them.

Tonight my goal is to listen and I have every expectation that this will be an insightful, respectful opportunity for constituents to voice your views. This is my 9th year in Congress and I am sure that those in attendance will conduct themselves tonight no different than you have in any of my previous town halls – with respect and a willingness to listen to all voices and opinions.

Next week I will be returning to Washington as Congress goes back into session. We all know, health care reform legislation will be the number one priority for the House of Representatives.

My position on health care should not be a mystery to anyone here.

I believe that health care should be a right for all Americans. Earlier this year I introduced legislation to amend the Constitution – H.J. Res. 4, the *Health Protection Amendment* – that would make health care a right for all citizens of the United States. I strongly believe that this goal – universal health coverage – can make our great nation not only healthier, but stronger and more productive.

Critics of making health care a right often say we already have universal health care – people can go to the emergency room and access care if they really need it. This is the best example of why I believe our health care in America is broken and needs to be fixed.

Our health care system is broken when we live in the wealthiest, most powerful country in the world, but health care is a privilege available to those with enough money to afford insurance and for those of us fortunate enough to have a job that provides health insurance. Sixty million Americans have no health insurance coverage or are under-insured.

In these tough economic times the loss of a job or an employer's belt tightening too often means the loss of health care for millions of families.

Our health care system is broken when our country spends \$2.4 trillion a year for health care – almost twice as much per person (\$7,300) as any other country – but we rank 37th in the world in health care outcomes.

Our health care system is broken when care is rationed because there is someone between you and your doctor making health care choices for you – like an insurance company bureaucrat.

For example, maybe you have heard of the term “*rescission?*” This is when an insurance company finds a pre-existing condition or a technicality to cancel coverage for a sick policyholder rather than paying a claim. This is also called “dumping the sick” and it needs to stop.

Our health care system is broken when there are 150,000 unnecessary deaths each year from avoidable medical errors and substandard care. Measuring poor outcomes is not an empty statistic – it is measuring lives needlessly lost which can be saved if we fix health care.
(cite: National Committee on Quality Assurance)

Our broken health care system and people who live here in our communities are living it.

This is from a letter I received two weeks ago from a constituent – Brad from St. Paul:

I need your help.

Over a year ago I was laid off from my job as a project manager at a local nonprofit organization... I couldn't afford the COBRA payments to continue my coverage from my employer so I applied for private insurance. I was denied due to pre-existing conditions.

I've been sick for two weeks. I'm not sure what's wrong with me because I can't afford to see a doctor.

I've tried calling community health clinics that offer sliding fee services. The ones I spoke with are no longer taking new patients or have waiting lists of over a year. I know if I need emergency care I can go to the local hospital, but I'll still get a bill I can't afford to pay. I don't think my current situation is life threatening, but the anxiety caused by my uncertainty is mounting.

What will happen to me if something more serious occurs?

Here is another letter – this one is from Ken in St. Paul:

Fortunately, I get health insurance coverage through my employer. In this past year, instead of lay-offs, my employer has chosen to freeze salaries, but the costs of health care, premiums and co-pays, are not frozen, and some treatment options are not covered or are further reduced in coverage.

In any case, we have insufficient income to cover new tests and procedures.

We are still paying for [my wife's breast cancer] surgery from five years ago. And, we now owe more than our net worth to credit card companies. I have put off my recommended screening for colon cancer because of 1) the cost to us of the testing, and 2) if the test is positive and any procedures are recommended, we will not be able to consider them anyway. In the meantime, I am looking for part-time work to supplement our household income so that my wife will have some options for her medical care, but I am competing with thousands of newly laid-off workers in the Twin Cities.

These are two brief accounts from real people's lives that reflect the struggles our neighbors, our family members, our fellow citizens are going through.

In Washington, as the health care debate continues, Minnesotans, like Brad and Ken, have a lot at stake.

But, I want everyone here tonight to know – health care reform is not guaranteed to pass this year.

There is a real possibility that this entire debate could result in nothing. Why?

Because opponents of reform are fighting to maintain the status quo. Fighting for the status quo is not about protecting people's health, it is about protecting billions in corporate profits.

My Republican colleagues in Congress have made “killing” health care reform the center of their political agenda. Their reform proposal focuses on doing nothing – nothing to control costs, nothing to expand access, nothing to improve quality.

The same people who spent \$1 trillion in Iraq, after misleading our nation into that war, now say it is too expensive to invest in the health of Americans here at home.

The same people who wanted to privatize Social Security are now labeling government sponsored care –

Medicare and Veterans health care – “socialized medicine.”

The same people who attack President Obama’s goals for health reform are standing shoulder to shoulder with the insurance industry that dumps sick policyholders and collect billions in profits.

The time has come to put people before profits. The time has come to make preventive care a priority. The time has come to make social responsibility and individual responsibility the cornerstones

of an expanded health care system.

My principals for moving forward with health reform in Congress include the following:

- Every child in America deserves to have access to health care when they need it.

- If you love your doctor and like your current insurance – nothing needs to change for you. You keep what you have.

- There must be a patient centered approach to health care in which quality care improves outcomes with a greater focus on prevention and healthy behaviors.

- I support a public insurance option that will increase competition in the marketplace, keeps premium costs down, and provides affordable insurance for all Americans.

- We need to prohibit discrimination by insurance companies based on pre-existing conditions and end the use of annual or lifetime caps on payment to deny coverage. It is time policyholders get the coverage they paid for.

- We need to strengthen Medicare by eliminating the waste, fraud and abuse that siphons valuable health care dollars away from our seniors and into the pockets of crooks.

- I support eliminating the Medicare part D “donut hole” to make prescription drugs affordable for all seniors and mandating Medicare to negotiate with drug companies for best price for taxpayers.

- Regarding cost, we need to pay for reforms with efficiencies, expanded preventive care that saves money, and cutting the excessive profits out of the system, not more deficit spending.

- Minnesota has been treated unfairly under Medicare with our doctors and physicians being paid less than half of what providers in Florida receive. The entire Minnesota congressional delegation support fixing the Medicare geographic payment inequities that penalizes our state and I am going to keep fighting to make that happen.

- Finally, I support health professionals and clergy working together to provide patients and families information, counseling, and options that enhance human dignity and respect one's faith at the end of a loved one's life.

And, now, I want to hear from you.

The format we will use tonight will be similar to the one I used in my health care forum last month.

Every speaker will be given two-minutes to share a comment or an opinion. You know where I stand on this issue – now I want to listen to you.

Andrew is here as our time keeper and he will randomly draw the tickets to select the speakers. If your number is drawn please move to the aisle and my staff will bring the microphone and hold it for you.

Out of respect for all gathered, I would ask the audience to refrain for jeering, cat calls, or other outbursts.

We are in a chapel and I would expect our conduct to reflect both the dignity of the venue and the seriousness of the subject we will be discussing.

Again, my appreciation to Macalester College for hosting our event and thanks to all of the active citizens for being here with me tonight.

I am eager to hear your thoughts.

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